HAWTHORNE THE PURITAN ARTIST

HAWTHORNE was a Puritan by temperament and descent from a long line of Puritan ancestors. But he was an artist also by temperament, and under the stimulation of the newly awakened feeling for literary art in New England in the early years of the nineteenth century. Thus he stood at the juncture of the Past and the Present and in full sympathetic understanding of both. He had the strong feeling for the past which belongs to all romantic natures, and he had the feeling for artistic expression which came to New England, after a long suppression of the art instinct, when its intellectual horizon was widened by contact with the modern world of thought.

The most significant fact in the literary history of New England is the supersedence of Puritanism by Transcendentalism among the more highly educated classes. This brought nothing less than an intellectual and artistic Renaissance to New England. But Transcendentalism was not a mere reaction; it was in part an outgrowth of Puritanism, an extension of the idealistic element in Puritanism, a new and broader manifestation of the old Puritan tendency to magnify Soul above everything else. One might say, if epigram were not dangerous, that the Puritan's thought was fixed entirely on man's soul and an angry God, and that the Transcendentalist's thought was fixed on man's soul and an infinitely mysterious universe.

Moreover, the morality of Transcendentalism in New England was precisely the old morality of Puritanism. Men's thoughts on religion had widened and grown somewhat vague, but men's thoughts on morality had not widened at all and were not in the least vague. The morality of

Transcendental Brook Farm was exactly the morality of Puritan Old South Church. Men held somewhat different ideas than their grandfathers about the way the ten commandments were delivered from Sinai, but they held exactly the same ideas about the binding quality of the commandments. Puritanism sank too deep into the New England character to be expunged in a generation by any new mode of thought.

And it had sunk too deep into the character of Nathaniel Hawthorne to be eliminated by the new influence of thought and art in the New England of his day. The first Hawthorne (or "Hathorne," as the name was originally spelled) in America came over with John Winthrop in 1630, and had his part in making the new country for conscience' sake. His son John was one of the judges in Salem who sent the witches to the gallows, and it was out of the tradition of a curse pronounced on the judge by one of the condemned witches that Nathaniel got a suggestion for "The House of the Seven Gables." They were Puritans of the Puritans, these Hawthornes, and defenders of the faith. Their distinguished descendant, the novelist, shuddered at the memory of their harsh deeds, but he also understood them. His typical attitude toward the old Puritans was a thorough understanding of their mental processes combined with horror at the results of those mental processes. He had much of their brooding nature; he was born in Salem, lived for a while in Raymond on Lake Sebago in Maine, went to Bowdoin College, lived for years after in seclusion at Salem, and all the while, singularly alone, he was brooding on the mysteries and dark implications of life.

But with all this he was also an artist, the most consummate literary artist of American letters thus far. He was a romantic artist, drawing most of his material from the Past,

legendary, symbolical, mystic, fanciful. But all the wonder and the mystery in his stories is shot through with verisimilitude. Leslie Stephen has said, "No modern writer has the same skill in so using the marvellous as to interest without exciting our incredulity"; and Hawthorne himself said that he strove to "mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor than any portion of the actual substance."

He wins this delicate, evanescent effect, "between the Real and Fantastic,"—and it is perhaps his chief quality as an artist,—by various methods: by disavowing responsibility for the legend he is reporting, for it is his habit to detach himself from the legend by some such phrase as "tradition says" thus and so; by mingling with the old weird legend some modern scientific explanation,—as for instance, a hint of apoplexy in a mysterious death to which tradition had assigned a supernatural cause; and by using the modern idea of mesmerism to explain phenomena which were ascribed to demoniacal possession in the old Puritan days in New England. Maule's Well in "The House of the Seven Gables" was cursed by its former owner, and, curiously enough, its water did begin to produce illness in those who drank of it; Hawthorne hints that the depth of a cellar which had been dug for the new house may have disturbed the sources of the well and let in salt water, but dexterously leaves with the reader a lingering idea that possibly a "subtler cause"—the curse on it—may, after all, have changed its character.

Above all, he secures his effect by the somber, misty gray atmosphere in which nearly all his stories, whether full-length novels or short tales, are wrapped, and this atmosphere is appropriate to the purposes of the artist of Puritanism. I write these words on a gray day at a window overlooking Lake Michigan; water, sky, and landscape are

all in one tone; the smoke from the steamers, locomotives, and foundry stacks are merely lines of deeper gray in a world that is all gray,—a world in monotone. Some people would call this a forbidding landscape; they want the sunshine of Corot, the brilliancy of Turner, the mellow glow of Inness, but Whistler would see in this very monotone the artist's opportunity. So Hawthorne saw the artist's opportunity in that gray pall which the New England conscience stretched over two centuries of New England history.

New England appealed to him as a Puritan, but it also appealed to him as an artist. He shuddered at the spectacle of sin and the inexorable New England conscience in a death grapple, but he also saw that right here was the opportunity for all the romance one could desire. Only a man of his delicate spiritual discernment could have discovered and expressed it. Walter Scott would not have found it there; he needed the noise and color that go with chivalry. But, on the other hand, Hawthorne would probably have been stunned into silence by an old country with a brilliant feudal history like Great Britain's. He was essentially a reflective-imaginative writer, brooding over a few suggestions until they yielded up to him their utmost possibilities of romance. His imagination would have been confused by a wealth of material. He got much out of the little, out of New England.

He has as truly expressed Puritan New England as Henry Fielding truly expressed beef-eating, ale-drinking, eighteenth-century England. The most robust of the British novelists have worked on big and crowded canvases; Fielding and Dickens introduced into a single novel a great many characters of diverse traits and strongly marked eccentricities; their genius had scope and huge vitality. But the genius of Hawthorne was intense rather than broad;

into one of his novels he put only a few characters,—about five in "The Marble Faun," not more than six in "The House of the Seven Gables," practically only three in "The Scarlet Letter." The range is narrow, but the vein is deep; into these few characters Hawthorne probes until the utmost secrets of their inmost lives have been revealed; and the episodes are as few as the characters, but also as deeply significant. His is the art of concentration; what he loses of the wide sweep of Fielding and Dickens, he compensates for by depth below depth of character, of personality, of spiritual and psychic experience. All this peculiarly fitted him to be the artist of a people with whom the inner life was the supreme thing, the only thing of real importance.

Puritanism in New England developed the conscience into a singularly delicate instrument of slow torture. Conscience is the special New England faculty, its development the New England *métier*. As Renaissance Italy developed a sense of art so sure and penetrating that it has been called "clairvoyant," so Puritan New England developed a special quality of conscience. And the effect of it has never departed. To this day the New Englanders have never liberated the conscience. Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, Agnosticism, Spiritualism, Buddhism, and all the other "isms" known to modern thought, have in turn swept New England, but the New England conscience has remained intact, like the storm-swept, rock-bound, unyielding New England coast.

Mr. W. D. Howells has perceived this and given it clear expression in many of his novels, with their New England women who have been emancipated from so much, but never from the sway of conscience. Mr. Howells has done nothing shrewder or cleverer than this reiterated portrait of the over-conscienced woman. She is a residuum of Puritanism,

without her grandmother's defined convictions, but with all of her grandmother's resourcefulness in unhappiness. She finds the opportunity in all manner of moral motes and social scruples to make herself wretched for conscience' sake, and to make everybody else wretched for her own sake, not from ill-nature, but through an inbred distrust of the ability of Providence to conduct the universe without her fidgety interference. In short, she suffers from enlargement of the conscience, is sure she must be doing wrong if her mind is at peace, is happy only when she is miserable, and thoroughly miserable when she is happy.

Not in its humors but in its solemnities, Hawthorne has depicted conscience excited by sin. Sin was the supreme fact of the world to the Puritan, and so it was to Hawthorne, the Puritan artist. "Sin" is an old-fashioned word; nowadays we substitute some softer, vaguer word, "evil" or "error"; but to the theologians of New England the thing was *sin*— a transgression of the law of God. It would be a long catalogue if I should name all the short stories which have sin and conscience for their theme: "The Minister's Black Veil," "The Wedding Knell," "Rappacini's Daughter," "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," "Roger Malvin's Burial," and many more of the "Twice Told Tales," and "Mosses from an Old Manse," are in this somber category. And in each of the three great novels there is a perfectly defined sin with its variety of retribution: in "The Scarlet Letter" the sin is adultery; in "The Marble Faun" it is murder; and in "The House of the Seven Gables" it is tyrannous injustice arising from cupidity. In all three the retribution is complete.

Hawthorne's theme is sin, not in the flush of its committal, but in the slow cumulative results of the punishment. In "The Scarlet Letter" and "The House of the Seven Gables"

the sin has been committed before the story proper opens, and in "The Marble Faun" the actual committal of the sin occupies only a few lines of indirect statement, and is itself the result of another and darker sin which had been committed before the story opens. The moment the thing is done the consequences begin, and it is on these consequences that Hawthorne concentrates all his attention and all his genius. The deliberate and unsensational quality of his style is admirably suited to reveal the inexorable, cancerous, fatal growth of the consequences. The wickedest ingenuity of man has never invented a torture to equal the slow torture of conscience, and Hawthorne, whose power lies in depicting states of mind rather than action, is a complete master in portraying this torture, as in Dimmesdale and Hester in "The Scarlet Letter," as in Miriam and Donatello in "The Marble Faun." Hawthorne is a romanticist, not a realist, but he is a romanticist with all the power of psychic analysis which is supposed to be the realist's peculiar possession. He depicts romantic wonder with the power of Walter Scott, realistic remorse with the power of George Eliot, psychic horror with the power of Edgar Allan Poe, and all with a delicate, evanescent quality of suggestion which is his own.

Like all great moralists, he perceives that the consequences of sin are not confined to the committers of it. That is one of the baffling mysteries of the world, that the innocent, sometimes the innocent yet unborn, must suffer for the guilty; or, as he himself puts it in his solemn epigrammatic way, "Every crime destroys more Edens than our own." The main theme of "The House of the Seven Gables" is the cumulative effect, through generations, on the Pyncheon family of Colonel Pyncheon's sin of injustice to Matthew Maule. Poor Hilda in "The Marble Faun" (and Haw-

thorne's skill in depicting almost divine purity of maidenhood is as excellent as his power of depicting sin)—poor Hilda, through not the slightest fault of her own, is involved in the coil of sin wound up by the murder which Miriam and Donatello commit, and this is shown with a subtlety possible only to the very greatest literary artists.

Twice Hawthorne has drawn radiant maidenly purity with something like terror of its awful loveliness—in Phœbe of "The House of the Seven Gables" and in Hilda of "The Marble Faun"; and then he conceives that such purity as this may be withered and blasted by the mere knowledge of evil, without the slightest participation in the evil, like a tender flower shriveled in a hot wind. It was this conception that Coleridge had in mind when he wrote "Christabel." It required great genius to reveal the slow stages of soul-sickness that come to Hilda from her mere knowledge of the murder done by Miriam and Donatello. Says Hilda: "I see how it is, Miriam. I must keep your secret and die of it. . . . Ah, now I understand how the sins of generations past have created an atmosphere of sin for those that follow. While there is a single guilty person in the universe, each innocent one must feel his innocence tortured by guilt. Your deed, Miriam, has darkened the whole sky!" And then Hawthorne himself adds those pregnant words, "Every crime destroys more Edens than our own."

This is delicate insight into the nature and consequences of sin, but it is not the subtlest that Hawthorne reveals. He has shown that there is in sin itself, and in its consequences, a transforming power and a developmental power. To do this and, at the same time, keep perfect faith with the Puritan conception of "the exceeding sinfulness of sin," required something more than genius, it required a spiritual discernment akin to the prophetic. It is Kenyon, in "The Marble

Faun," who sees that Donatello is undergoing a transformation, that a soul is awakening in him as the result of his sin and the anguish that followed. The book was published in England under the title of "Transformation," and this is the significance of it: Donatello, a glad, careless, innocent animal, commits a murder, and by dumb agonies grows into a grave, earnest, spiritual man. It is Hilda, however, the perfect Puritan maiden, who declines to recognize this transforming power of sin. And one fancies that unconsciously Hawthorne represented in these two—Kenyon and Hilda—a struggle that went on in his own mind, between the rigid Puritan view of sin and this wider view of the power of sin itself to produce a spiritual quality. In "The Scarlet Letter" the sin which demoralized and practically crazed Arthur Dimmesdale, produced in Hester a slow and agonized development into noble womanhood.

In neither case is there any palliation of sin; in both cases —that is to say, in both "The Marble Faun" and "The Scarlet Letter"—Hawthorne declines to allow happiness. It was a true perception which forbade him to permit Dimmesdale and Hester to go away together. Regarded rationally and realistically, it seems no such huge addition to the sin already committed, a sin which has already marked these two for disgrace and Dimmesdale for slow death, that they should go into exile together. They have nothing more to lose, and Hester may save the man's life by nursing him; but the solemn idea of retribution forbids this; this carved, poised, statuesque story, not of passion but of passion's fatal result, must not be permitted to deteriorate into a mere story of an elopement. And so in "The Marble Faun" Miriam and Donatello, bound to each other in the bond of murder, are not permitted to be bound in the bond of happiness. Very solemnly Kenyon adjures

them to work out their souls' salvation, as they may, by mutual helpfulness in dual penance, but not to seek that happiness in love, which belongs to the innocent.

There is no slackening of Hawthorne's firm grasp on the true nature of sin, and there are no palliations, and yet he shows that there is this transforming and developmental power in sin, for that also is a fact of sin. Henry James has said that "Hawthorne always knew what he was about." Henry James was talking about Hawthorne's art, but it is equally true of Hawthorne in the ethical world. There also Hawthorne knew what he was about. Hawthorne knew the facts of life too well not to see that men and women sometimes pass through the fierce fires of sin and remorse and come out purified. No sane person would choose the process of development through which Donatello and Hester Prynne passed, for it is as bitter and terrible as damnation itself. It would be easier to die or to go mad, and if one were choosing, he should choose death or madness. But the facts of life remain, and Hawthorne saw them,—sin does sometimes transform and sometimes develops.

Hawthorne sees one more thing about sin,—that sometimes even out of sin there comes the flower of life and purity. The child Pearl is the fruit of the sin committed by Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne. It is written that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, and one purpose of "The House of the Seven Gables" is to show how far-reaching and enduring is that law. Shall not the child Pearl, then, be punished for the sins of her parents? Instead, she flits through the story—"The Scarlet Letter"—like a beam of light, and grows up into pure and perfect womanhood. Her parents have expiated their sin in their own lives and souls. Day by day, hour by hour, and breath by breath, they have "paid in full." At the end of the book Hester sums

it up in one cry, a bit of simple realism uncommon with Hawthorne, but in this instance realism was as sufficient as classic art to express the magnitude of the thought; so Hester says to Dimmesdale: "Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another with all this woe!" And perhaps they have ransomed Pearl, and there is nothing left for her to pay; out of the dunghill of passion has sprung this fair child-flower, out of the lion's rotting carcass this honey-sweet, out of sin and death this immortal life. Sin is very strong, but God is stronger than sin. Sin as well as righteousness has its spiritual laws, and Hawthorne understands them all.

It is by his penetration into the utmost secrets of sin, by his firm, delicate handling of all its phases, that Hawthorne contrives to leave in the mind of his reader no such sense of despair as follows the perusal of the books of the realists, even one so greatly pure as George Eliot. With the subtlety of his perception, strengthening rather than weakening the sense of sin's terrible and inexorable laws, he yet contrives to show that sin, though a dreadful fact, is a fact of a world which God has not deserted. The impression he leaves is solemn and solemnizing, but not despairful.

In expounding this solemn theme Hawthorne employs a style which is surely the purest that has yet been achieved in America. It is a style so different from that of the current novel and magazine story that the first impression it makes on a reader accustomed only to more modern methods is probably that of formalism. The careful student of Hawthorne will observe that nearly all of his books open a little stiffly. Gradually the author warms up to his work and transmutes formality into sublimity.

This is noticeable in all of his full-length novels, but especially in "The Marble Faun." It was the last of his great novels, and the only one with the scene laid out of New

England. It is set in Italy, though two of the most important characters, Hilda and Kenyon, are New Englanders. The foreign scene, the somewhat extraneous description of Rome (Hawthorne apparently could not escape a sense of duty to make his novel a sort of sublimated guide-book for less fortunate New Englanders who had not had his privilege of travel), and perhaps the effect of advancing years, make his novel more than usually labored in its first part. It is not until Chapter XIX, the chapter following the brief account of the murder, that he rises to his full power, but then the effect is nothing short of sublime.

Donatello, a non-moral, not immoral, faun-like creature, who is in love with Miriam, a vivid girl with mingled Italian, Jewish, and English blood, has thrust over a cliff to his death a man who had a mysterious power over Miriam and was blighting her life. Donatello thought that he saw in Miriam's eyes a permission to commit the act, and Miriam, knowing that the wish was in her heart that she might be finally rid of her persecutor, fears that Donatello may have read in her eyes an unconscious assent to the dreadful act. So these two are suddenly bound together by crime. There sweeps over Miriam an exalted sense of freedom, of power, combined with a consciousness that she is no longer dreadfully alone in the world, but is forever knit up with this beautiful young murderer; and in a mental intoxication she feels that she has suddenly been inducted into a new fraternity, and is the sworn and trusted sister of all murderers, high and low, from those who assassinated Julius Cæsar (they are passing through Pompey's forum) to baby stranglers,—for, says Hawthorne, "guilt has its moments of rapture, too"; and over all there is a sense of doom that can never be escaped, a coil twined about these two that will slowly annihilate them. As they pass Hilda's window they

see her standing in an attitude of prayer. The image of this pure girl breaks in on the wild confusion of guilt, and overwrought passions, and the dark night, with startling effect, like Macduff's arrival at Macbeth's blood-stained castle,—innocent Macduff intruding upon a world of sin and chaos, coming with the morning, but coming as unconscious Nemesis.

The whole of Hawthorne's description is written in a style as majestic as the scene itself; a style which for once—and it is very uncommon with Hawthorne—breaks into blank verse rhythm for two and a half lines, as if the weight of all the terrific emotion of the scene were too great for prose, and demanded the wings of poetry for a brief flight.

The greatness of Hawthorne's style is not in realistic details of manner, dialect, and minor photographic actualities, but rather in the purity and delicacy of his expression and the grandeur of his cumulative effects. That practised artist Robert Louis Stevenson said (and if we grasp the full meaning of this passage we shall be already at least half educated in literary art): "Let him [*i.e.*, the novelist] not care particularly for each man's tone of conversation, the pungent material details of the day's manners, the reproduction of the atmosphere and the environment. These elements are not essential; a novel may be excellent and yet have none of them; a passion or a character is so much the better depicted as it rises clearer from material circumstance. In this age of the particular let him remember the ages of the abstract, the great books of the past. . . . And as the root of the whole matter let him bear in mind that his novel is not a transcript of life, to be judged by its exactitude; but a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity."

This is the pure classic conception of art, where the effect

is not in the realism and accumulation of detail, but is in the poise, proportion, and effect of the whole. In this day of hurried and frequently half-educated people writing "best-sellers" and magazine tales, the general public too often confounds all art with realism. Profanity and slang and dialect are all right in their place, and when a master like Kipling uses them they are used with true effect; but when a feebler man relies on profanity and slang to give all the force to his story, the effect is generally—not art. In the Rock Creek Cemetery near Washington is one of the greatest examples of American sculpture, St. Gaudens's statue of Grief. Any accumulation of the details of realistic grief, any hysteria, would have ruined it. It is the utter simplification of one great idea—silent grief; and this is accentuated in every line of the figure, in the long, sweeping drapery; everything is there to emphasize the one thought, simple, severe, classic.

The passion of our day for realistic detail is simply killing the highest form of art in language—that is to say, poetry. A dramatist puts a scene from the Bowery on the stage with all its beer and profanity and depravity; an actress of power rages through the scene; and behold, men are so captivated by the photographic depiction of a phase of real life that they see no merit in the lofty poetic passion of Shakespeare! This kind of realism may be all right in its place, but it is certainly all wrong when it destroys our power to appreciate the high and modulated things of great dramatic art.

Hawthorne wrote in the simple grandeur of an elder time. Had he wished, he could doubtless have made sailors talk salt dialect, for he had heard enough of that kind of talk when he was weigher and gauger in the Boston custom-house. But he was more interested in showing the great passions and the great fates.

"The Scarlet Letter" is the story of only three persons, but so intensely are they drawn that the novel ranks with "David Copperfield" and its two or three score of people. The story is not of passion, but of retribution; stroke by stroke is painted in until an almost intolerable grandeur of effect has been achieved. There are realistic details aplenty, nearly a whole chapter on Hester Prynne's needlework, but every stroke of the needle is made to stitch in the experience of Hester's soul. What an artist's touch is that to have Hester employ the best of her needlework in embroidering the scarlet "A," the letter which the law condemned her to wear as the badge and mark of her adultery and shame! Page by page, and chapter by chapter, the effect is cumulative,—the moral exhaustion of Dimmesdale, the slow recuperation of Hester, the demoniacal revenge of Chillingworth. There is no haste and no waste; all the details are realistically New England, but the result is classic Greek,—reserved, chaste, sculptured, a pure white marble statue splashed with a single ineradicable scarlet splotch. It is tonal perfection. Is it a great theme? It is the same theme we find in a thousand flashy sensational novels, and a thousand other dull realistic novels. Its greatness consists in a perfect assessment of life's values and an art competent to exhibit the inner significance of life.

By the same token, Hawthorne is able to give his characters a wonderful appeal. They are frequently unsubstantial, like the people of a dream world. Some one has said they are pictures rather than people. The child Pearl is not so much a flesh-and-blood creature as an elf, a dancing ray of light. Phœbe in "The House of the Seven Gables" is like a morning-glory with the dew on it, fresh, fragrant, pure. One of Hawthorne's greatest triumphs is old Hepzibah in that same "House of the Seven Gables." She is

sixty years old, an old maid with a scowl that frightens little children and turns adults from her door; she is gaunt, she is grotesque in dress and manners, she is almost toothless, near-sighted, stiff and creaking in her joints, so timid that everybody thinks her hostile. And Hawthorne never lets us forget these things; they are repeated, like an opera theme, whenever Hepzibah comes on the scene. And yet with it all, this most unattractive old maid, by her single-hearted devotion to her persecuted and half-crazed brother, is an appealing human figure, who, through this one absorbing devotion and emotion, is lifted out of all the ugly, sordid reality into the spacious region of fine art.

Walter Pater has a famous phrase about "burning with a gemlike flame." Hawthorne's style burns with a gemlike flame, slow, steady, at low temperature. And his style is an index to his temperament, brooding, isolated, somber. He was no pessimist, but neither was he an enthusiast. He thoroughly believed in the world's progress, but he believed it must come by very slow degrees, and he could not think that any one man is enormously important to the world. Hence there is a detachment from the hot daily interests of the world, a pensive and at times almost wan note in his utterances. He had in himself nothing of the reformer, nothing of the hot spirit of the man who is roused by a sense of evil to seek the remedy, nor of the faith in himself that he, above all men, could find and furnish the remedy. The evil which Hawthorne saw in the world is as old as the world itself, began with the fall of man, and will cease only when human nature ceases. Hence he did not write "novels of purpose." He wrote as pure artist, setting down the facts and phenomena of sin with a sure hand, appealing to the individual conscience, and appealing to it in the detached terms of high art.

Hawthorne's is not the only form of art. Art is wide as well as long, and there is place in its many mansions for many different kinds of genius. Men with a fiercer temperament than his make fiercer and more glittering art. But in that somber gray monotone, which is his natural style, he has not been surpassed by any writer of English fiction, and in pure and high art he has not been equaled by any other maker of fiction in America.